THE SHIP FROM YUCATAN

By Miss *CARRA CALSTOCK*

PART 1: THE MEDALLION

14th May 1841.

It was early in the summer of my sixteenth year that I met my first Spaniard. I beg patience, dear reader, as the significance of this may not at first be clear, although I can offer my best assurance that all will be revealed in due time.

My father had been quick to take advantage of the emerging Industrial Age, and was a founding partner in Stead & Farrell, a company concerned primarily in the export of fabrics. While this endeavour afforded us significant luxury, it meant that he spent most of his days at the London townhouse, or else was visiting his supplier in Leicester, only coming to our Torstow manor for a handful of days out of each month. Since my early youth, I had been afflicted by an ague which left me short of breath and quite giddy at the merest exertion. This seemed exasperated by the excitement of thronging cities, and so for most of my childhood, I have had the run of the clifftop manor, not far from Torstow.

I was kept ably by a small retinue of staff, notably Mattley the butler, Carter the driver, and Ms Ida of whom I was particularly fond. She had known me since she had been my dry nurse, and as I progressed through girlhood into a young lady, so she too stepped through the roles of nurse, governess, and finally my most trusted servant and confidant. In all regards but natal, Ms Ida was a mother to me - a role I may have otherwise yearned to have occupied, as my natural mother, a lifelong sufferer of a mysterious illness much like my own, had passed away during my birth.

I was, as I say, a rather sickly child and as such a majority of my time was spent within the house and grounds of Stead Manor. Since I was able to parse the written word, I was a voracious consumer of books, and spent much of my time in the parlour in a seat by the window which overlooked the sea. My father's collection of texts ranged from simple manuels and histories to works - added at my behest - of great sweeping romance, and kept at the far part of the library where visitors may not immediately tread, some small works on the occult; the art of the seance, records of the dark cold shadows in the colonies, accounts of spectres and the like. These were among my favourites - perhaps an element of my condition, but there seemed to be something so achingly lovely among the sorrow and fear that drew my interest as a magnet might draw iron slivers. Thus, between the library and parlour I would wander; to the library to find a prize, then to my accustomed view of the oft gloomy sea to devour it. A took many meals there, and at times my habits took on such languor that it prompted Ms Ida to voice concerns that I may take root.

As it often is with such maladies, it was the nature of my ague that there were days where I could scarcely raise my head from the pillow, and others in which I found myself able to walk about the grounds near as well as any whole person. On such days, I would walk the gardens of the estate, or else plead with Ms Ida to accompany me by carriage into Torstow, where I might sojourn along the dockside market. I passed many fine hours this way, before the sun met the ocean on the horizon, and Carter would ferry both Ms Ida and myself back to Stead Manor.

It was on one of these jaunts that I met the Spaniard. The sun had not long passed its zenith, and Ms Ida and myself had availed ourselves of a repast of freshly caught oysters, with squeezed lemons, from the Mediterranian coast, perhaps Italy or Spain.

It was my usual habit of such sojourns to seek out Madame L'Om[illegible], a travelling fortune teller, reader of both palm and card, and peddler of curios which at once delighted and repulsed my young mind. I suppose, dear reader, that my illness was the source of my fascination with the world beyond the realms of human certainty.

Madame L'Ombre was, on this day, nowhere to be found. I bade Ms Ida to escort me further along the promenade. My thought was that perhaps Madame had arrived late, and had to set up her stall in the overspill of jumbled stalls, staffed by those unlucky or unimportant enough to find a berth on the promenade proper. It was further along this dock that I met the Spaniard.

He was, judging from his attire, a sailor by profession. Simple, practical garb, although with charms to several saints about his neck, and heavy gold rings in his ears. He had no stall, it seemed, and was content to pass the time among the vendors, perched on a mooring cleat and sipping from a bottle of what I presume was rum. The bottle, perhaps upon its owner noticing my approach, vanished as if by sleight of hand When he addressed me, it was in a manner most peculiar, a broken blend of English and his native tongue, spoken with an accent I could not truly place, which at the time I presumed to be Spanish. A sound somewhat confusing, but not unpleasant - queer and playful to my ear.

Ms Ida immediately rebuked him for approaching me thus, quite to my suprise - how was this man to know I was a young lady of standing, I who was on foot and dressed simply, as was my wont for such sojourns?

After a moment of somewhat heightened confusion, thanks in no small part to the linguistic differences - the Spaniard's English was broken, and both Ms Ida and myself simply had no Spanish at all - realisation and then remorse dawned across the man's features. He made profuse apologies, going so far as to bow low to us, and to offer a diversion as recompense for his rudeness. Ms Ida and I, having long shared a love of small theatre and parlour tricks, gladly took him up on this offer.

The Spaniard, who by now had introduced himself as Luis Valdez, produced from his person a remarkable medallion. It sat neatly in the palm of his hand, and displayed a curiously melancholic engraving. The style of this etching was blockish and foreign; one unfamiliar with the artistry of the Americas might have thought it crude. The design, scored into the golden face of the medallion, depicted a female face, impassively staring back at the viewer. A series of small bars, giving the impression of a rope, was looped around the neck of this character, to form a noose. The air from it was at once grotesque and welcoming, a soft and gentle visage that almost seemed to whisper comfort; come to me, sweet child.

I started. Some small shift in Valdez's palm seemed to cause the carved image to change. The face had grown gaunt, and taken on aspects of a skull!

I am ashamed to admit that in this moment I gripped Ms Ida's arm and gasped. As I have said previously, I am one who greatly enjoys tales of the strange and macabre, and am ever curious thereof, but something about the alluring grotesquery of the engraving piqued my nerves in such a way that left me reeling, as if in the worst throes of my ague.

Presently, I returned to myself, to be met with a look of deep concern from Ms Ida. As with many people of frail body, I tended to pride myself on the strength of my mental constitution, and so was loath to admit myself shaken, or to even recount what I saw - or thought I saw. Ms Ida, used as she was to my willful manner and habit of overexertion, stood nearer to me that I might lean on her arm, knowing me too well to suggest that we leave until Valdez had completed his trick.

Valdez had apparently not noticed, or else had chosen to downplay the strength of my agitation, or perhaps it was I who had masked my fright well. The Spaniard commenced twirling and spinning the medallion around his fingers and knuckles. It bounced deftly around his grip, catching the afternoon light at its edges.

'It caught your eye, did it not?' He spoke perhaps in acknowledgement of the start it gave me, or, I hoped, perhaps by rote. 'Like many, I had heard tales from the new world, of great cities where the streets were lined with gold - where riches beyond your wildest dreams simply -' he paused, spreading his palms to indicate the medallion had vanished. To my delight, however, he opened his mouth and disgorged the medallion into a waiting hand. '... spilled from every crevasse. Alas, upon my arrival in Yucatan, I found that my noble forebears had already availed themselves of the spoils of conquest. Or so I thought - but a local guide named Aapo span me a tale of untouched

temples and settlements - abandoned by time or plague - deep in the jungles of southern Yucatan. Our party set out, though splintered after a week of travel. After a further 4 days, the trees grew so thick that we had to leave the horses and continue on foot. I lost count of the length of time we were in the depths of the jungle, and such sights we saw - sights I mustn't relay to a lady,' he added with a nod to Ms Ida, though I think I personally would have enjoyed hearing of some of these sights.

He continued: 'I was close to losing my faith in Aapo, and instead beseeching St Christopher to guide me back to a settlement - any settlement, oh to see a wall of stone - but then the trees parted and there we saw ... the temple of Izamal! Long abandoned, so said Aapo and the evidence of our eyes, though with a curious sense of being watched over. Maybe God had smiled upon us. It was there that I claimed for myself a piece of the new world- ah!' It was on this utterance that the medallion slipped dramatically from Valdez's grasp. It sailed, turning end on end, trailed with a glimmer of reflected light, and fell with the merest splash into Torstow Harbour. Valdez shook his head. 'And now, it is gone ... unless,' he nodded to Ms Ida, a sly look indicated that this was still part of the act. 'Your purse, madam?'

Ms Ida's hand at once darted to her money belt. Sure enough, she retrieved from her purse the very medallion that I had seen - or thought I had seen - fall into the sea.

'Keep it,' Valdez bade us, 'a token of apology for my slovenly conduct. Besides, I took several.'

I laughed and clapped and, as I did so, found myself on the precipice of a giddy and weak spell. Ah, my ague, conspiring as a bitter foe might to ruin any joy.

As Valdez left, no doubt in search of a more private locale to resume his bottle, Ms Ida took me by the elbow and asked of me, in the tones of one speaking to a trusted confident:

'Miss Briar, I beseech we don't linger here. The smell from the fish stalls has given me the most hideous headache.'

Oh dear, sweet Ms Ida, to lie to me so kindly, as though it were not my ague and my weakness that was the ruin of our outing.

I did my best to retain composure and discretion, though was immeasurably grateful for Ms Ida's arm to lean on. I know that it is the preserve of a lady to be delicate - oh, how often I have been reminded by the well-intentioned - but to have delicacy imposed on me thus seems so monstrously unfair. Perhaps it is a punishment of my nature, to curtail my willful and outgoing mind, God struck my body with this accursed blood sorrow. Or perhaps my mind grew thus to spite the forces that weakened my flesh.

Upon our return to the carriage - horse drawn for, while my father had the means to a motor carriage, he reasoned, perhaps rightly, that the engine roar and mechanical shudder would aggravate my condition - Ms Ida assisted me to embark, then settled into the passenger's compartment alongside me. Upon her signal, Carter whipped the horses, and we began to slowly negotiate the cobbles of Torstow Harbour.

Ms Ida, having allowed me time to collect myself and bury my shame at the exertion required to complete a task so simple as boarding a carriage, broached the question of my possible need of a physician.

'No, thank you Ms Ida,' Even to myself, my voice sounded more as a sigh than as language. 'It may yet pass, and the blood ministrations seem only to make me more tired. If I've not regained my strength by dinner, perhaps then.'

'As you wish, Miss Briar,' Ms Ida said. A ghost of concern haunting her visage, but her tone remained loving and dutiful.

I know my adamance must take a toll on her patience, but I simply must speak with honesty - a lifetime of ministrations has led me to two simple facts: bloodletting drains my energy, and laudanum leaves me sick and itchy, neither of which gives me the impression that my symptoms are abating.

I bade Ms Ida show me once more the token Valdez had given to us. I turned the golden object over in my hand, enjoying the weight and little crevasses made by the engraving, the curious warmth of the gold. The reverse side was a pattern - small squares forming into a large triangle - which I read was as common to the natives of the new world as stripes were to the English. I looked again to the obverse, shifting the medallion in the light from the carriage window, hoping to perhaps recreate the trick of the light that had startled me on the promenade. I could not, although I found my eyes drawn to that of the carved face. In my rational mind, of course, I knew these were twin dimples in gold, but I fancied I saw something more there; an invitation to rest, words of comfort. A queer and not wholly unpleasant sensation of a hand, softly cradling my head and a partial side of my neck. Warm, and gentle, yet strong enough that I was quite confident to trust my weight to it. I allowed my head to loll into this embrace, and was taken by surprise to find no such hand supporting me.

'Miss Briar?!' Ms Ida stated.

I blinked, feeling the lethargy of my ague even in this merest of actions. 'I fear I have found myself quite weary.'

It was yet early, but despite my protestations thus, that Ms Ida insisted a physician be sent for as soon as we arrived at the manor. I truly did protest, as has long been my habit, but ultimately had to concede that medicine often makes one feel worse before symptoms abate and that, well read though I am, the knowledge of one young lady can hardly match that of widely accepted medical convention. The quiet was not frosty, though I spent the remainder of the journey silently pondering a fate so cruel as to allow me such strength that I might lead myself into false hopes, only to have them dashed time and again, to be left pallid and shaking abed once more. There are days, I confess, where I even wish that my condition might grow worse, so that I may at least accept my fate without hope, if all hope is to be futile.

In better, more even tempered thoughts, I know of course that it is childish to think this, that each ounce of strength is a gift from the Lord, and each opportunity is to be cherished and grasped as firmly as I'm able, that it is my duty, even, to embrace life as fully as I may. And yet ...

END OF PART ONE